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Gateways to the global: Governing school-industry partnerships

CUSHLA KAPITZKE (QUT) and **STEPHEN HAY** (Griffith University)

Locating partnerships

Partnerships have emerged as a prominent feature of policy discourse in countries including the US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Caldwell, 2004; Franklin, Block & Popkewitz, 2003). They have appeared there as a solution to problems of government that include the development of public infrastructure, the need to promote innovation and enterprise as a means of maintaining economic competitiveness, the provision of welfare services, and civic capacity building. In examining partnerships, the paper takes up the organizing themes of this conference around schools and community capacity building, but it revises them in light of recent theorizations of social partnerships.

The specific focus of the study is a number of school-industry partnerships that have developed recently in the educational context of Queensland, Australia. One of these partnerships, the *Gateway to the Aerospace Industry* initiative, has provided a rich focus for research as it involves multiple affiliated global industry partners — the largest of these being Boeing Corporation — and multiple affiliated partnership schools spanning the state, Catholic and Independent school sectors in Queensland.

A growing body of theoretical and empirical literature has examined partnerships as a phenomenon located within broader frameworks of neoliberal government (Cardini, 2006; Falconer & McLaughlin, 2000; Larner & Butler, 2005; Popkewitz, 2003; Seddon, Billett & Clemens, 2004). Accordingly, we conceptualize educational partnerships as one aspect of a set of neoliberal strategies for the governance of education in Queensland which includes experiments in devolved community-based schooling and restructured home-school relations. The paper draws on research in governmentality studies to theorise partnerships within rationalities of government informed by dominant conceptions of globalisation (Miller & Rose, 1990; Rose & Miller, 1992; Rose, 1996a). Our findings suggest that contrary to policy narratives characterizing globalization as a monolithic force for change, as it is realized in neighborhoods and communities globalization manifests as an *effect* of micro-techniques of government that are mobilized to constitute social spaces and subjectivities in its name.

Mapping images of the global

Mainstream theoretical and policy accounts of globalisation describe the phenomenon as an epoch-defining force for social and economic change. In these, globalisation is characterised as escaping territory by transcending the protection afforded populations by territorial borders that define sovereign entities such as the nation state. Its characterization through metaphors such as ‘time-space compression’ (Giddens, 1990), ‘spaces of flows’ and ‘network societies’ (Castells, 2006) reflect assumptions about its embeddedness within proliferating information and communications technologies (Castells, 2001). In this context partnerships have held the promise for governing authorities of joined-up solutions to a ‘runaway world’ (Clark, 2002; Riddell & Tett, 2001).

The global as governable spaces and subjectivities

Seeking to disrupt the assumptions of mainstream globalisation narratives, our analysis of the Gateway to the Aerospace Industry partnership engaged globalisation not as an ontological fact but as an outcome of knowledge producing discourses and practices (Larner & Walters, 2004; Sidhu, 2004). Linking globalization with epistemology shifts the focus of inquiry to the ways that modern governance depends on the production and application of particular truths through forms of expertise (Miller & Rose, 1990; Rose, 1996b; Rose & Miller, 1992). The methodology of this approach examines how globalization truths infuse and shape the spaces of situated policy and practice. Rejecting commonsense notions that globalisation is a phenomenon occurring ‘out there,’ it suggests instead that globalisation is a form of embodied consciousness intimately connected to the construction of an individual’s relationships with itself and others.

Education policy as global imaginary

A useful conceptual framework for understanding governmental programs like public-private partnerships is the concept, *social imaginary* (Appadurai, 2001; Massey, 1999). The notion of imaginary accords with how governing rationalities act to constitute particular versions of the present and with how epistemological dimensions of governing rationalities are linked to individual ontologies, or ways of being. Social imaginaries, then, refer to the ways people imagine their social existence and how this fits with others through expectations and norms that are accepted as given (Taylor, 2004). Social imaginaries thus play a critical role in legitimating policy programs by securing popular consent (Rizvi, 2006). It is significant that the aerospace industry partnership strategy in Queensland was located within a policy framework called *Smart State*, which seeks to locate Queensland’s social and economic futures within technology-based industries and the global economy.

Examining globalisation’s potential governing effects must therefore begin by undermining its political imagination (Larner & Le Heron, 2002). A starting point is to interrogate the apparent unity implied by the concept of globalisation. In this regard, Rose (1999) points to the creative and political aspect of naming, which confers unity upon multiplicity. The act of naming assembles singularities out of diverse material objects and located social practices such as policy documents, media releases, school curricular texts, minutes of meetings, discussion forums and so on. This cohesion, in turn, reaffirms aspects of globalization that fit the policy narrative (e.g., the need to be globally competitive) by obscuring non-confirming processes and silencing contradictory voices.

Bearing this in mind, we therefore explore how governing aspirations informed by global imaginaries were translated into practical programs of educational reform through school-industry partnerships. The analysis is drawn from three data sources. These are interviews with key personnel of five partnership schools, notes taken at six committee meetings of a leading partnership school, and other text-based materials such as media releases and syllabus documents. We begin with the policy context within which the partnership arose.

Imagining and enacting the spaces of global partnerships

Consistent with the techno-social rationality of globalisation narratives, the language of the partnership in question was embedded firmly within discourses of global networks. The partnership title, *Gateways to the Aerospace Industry*, was symbolic of the supply, networking, and development capacities that it endowed the partners. The main location, known as *The Gateway*, is named after a large bridge located close to the capital city’s airport and comprises a vast and expanding multiplex of roadways, commercial enterprises, and

logistical firms. Transport and distribution facilities in the area include a dedicated train service and sea port, both of which enhance connectivity for flows of goods, services, and people.

The relation of governmental expertise and policy with local educational practice is not one of determination but of *translation* at ‘thousands of points,’ where the lives of individuals and social entities such as schools are constrained to align with the objectives of governing authorities (Rose, 1999). This notion of *translatability* of education policy into practical programs of government does not imply that partnerships, or the global imaginaries they sustain, are stable or durable entities. The reason being that technologies of government mobilised to implement them are not purpose designed for particular programs but are improvised from social, administrative, and cultural resources that are available at specific points in place and time. They are

... more Heath Robinson than Audi, full of parts that come from elsewhere, strange couplings, chance relations, cogs and levers that don’t work – and yet which “work” in the sense that they produce effects that have meaning and consequences for us (Rose, 1996b, p. 38).

Thus, government becomes an inexact and problematic process in which strategies

... are hampered by underfunding, professional rivalries, and the impossibility of producing the technical conditions that would make them work – reliable statistics, efficient communication systems, clear lines of command, properly designed buildings, well framed regulations or whatever. Unplanned outcomes emerge from the intersection of one technology with another, or from the unexpected consequences of putting a technique to work (Miller & Rose, 1990, p. 11).

This renders partnerships exceedingly fragile and contingent upon volatile social, educational, and economic processes and forces.

The Gateway Partnership: Tensions and contradictions

The unstable and contingent nature of the art of government was revealed in the manner by which the Gateways partnership emerged in Queensland. This was heavily mediated by prevailing economic circumstances and the dynamics of education policy as played out in local settings. The initiative was established in 2004 following an approach by the then Executive Director of Boeing Australia Incorporated to the Director General of Education Queensland. The concern motivating this initial contact was to address a projected skills shortage in Queensland’s expanding aerospace industry in light of Boeing’s successful tender for a maintenance contract with the Royal Australian Air Force. This skills shortage was perceived as a capacity constraint for expansion of the aerospace industry in Queensland.

A further enabling condition for the partnership related to the context of one of the principal partnership schools. This school, located in an industrial and commercial fringe suburb, had operated mainly as an adult campus for students transitioning into higher education. For a number of years, however, it had suffered declining enrolments. Furthermore, its potential feeder primary schools were located in higher socioeconomic areas which meant that parents bypassed the school as a potential destination for their children in preference to the private schools readily accessible in Brisbane’s inner suburban areas. For this school, specialisation in aerospace represented an opportunity to re-establish itself as an adolescent campus and to

grow its numbers and reputation. Thus, the conditions of possibility for the emergence of the partnership was, in part, mediated by the history of political and social tensions between state and private schooling in Australia, which impacted historically on state education's market share of high ability students (Teese, 2000).

The improvised nature of the partnership strategy was further realised by the necessity to translate the aspirations of government and industry for human capital formation into techniques and programs deemed *actionable* in schools. This required design and development of a Senior Syllabus for Aerospace Studies by the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA), which was trialed by six selected schools in 2005. Syllabus development and implementation in Queensland is typically a 5-year process but in this case it took less than a year. Expedition of the process in this way demonstrated atypical flexibility on the part of the education bureaucracy and showed the ready translatability of industry expertise into educational materials. However, the course was designed as a Studies Authority subject suitable for students intending to progress to university. This meant that enrolment numbers in the course were limited in some partnership schools, especially those servicing low socioeconomic areas. In order to sustain enrolments some schools were required to blend senior classes or run classes with low numbers at significant cost. Over the longer term, this raised questions of sustainability in some school communities.

As well, the range of partner interests and objectives meant that the partnership was characterised by internal contradictions and limited efficacy. Legal constraints complicating the implementation of the curriculum included the issue of under-age students working in licensed premises and the concern with airport security clearances for students and contact personnel. Another constraint was the incompatibility of longstanding educational mores. For instance, for reasons of insurance Queensland Government policy did not allow work experience in and around airports. This was changed, and work experience undertaken by selected students at participating facilities became a productive key element of the program.

This reconfiguration of governmental technologies opened new kinds of social spaces that were functional to the partnership in and around the schools, the education bureaucracy, and other partner organizations. These comprised hybrid spaces in which the partnership was imagined and performed. Examples included executive and cluster group meetings bringing together school and industry interests, school level committee meetings, off-campus briefing sessions, workplace excursions, and community events such as student award functions organised by Boeing.

One social space entailing reconfiguration of the student and teacher figure was the *Boeing Enterprise Team* for which students from one high school met with local primary school students for one day each week. As part of this community initiative, the students designed and developed induction booklets for Boeing staff who were employed at an RAAF base in another state. This innovative, cross-state curriculum activity demonstrated the way in which local spaces and practices constituted broader spatial imaginaries. The constitution of hybrid spaces encouraged participants to imagine their institutions as located within global coordinates that were inhabited by non-educational others and called forth alternative performances of the self. Within this context of a common community of fate and desirous of making the partnership succeed, school personnel adopted aspects of enterprise culture valued by the private sector.

Conclusion

We conclude with two points. First, in contrast to received wisdom, this study has shown that attempts on the part of Queensland education authorities to configure partnerships as self-regulating spaces has been achieved only through intensive regulatory effort.

Second, it is apparent that the partnership was made possible only through the reorganization of available governmental technologies and material and discursive resources. If schools were to function as a nursery of human capital for Queensland's aerospace industry, this objective had to be translated through mundane technologies operationalised in local schools, communities, and other partner organizations. This operationalization included a curriculum that could meet broad educational objectives and be delivered and evaluated in schools within the constraints of existing teacher expertise, school timetabling, available physical resources, and information technologies. The implication here is that if school-industry partnerships are to succeed they require the mobilization of techniques and practices that, to some extent, enable the aspirations and values of each partner organization to be translated or expressed through the practices and discourses of the other (Miller & Rose, 1990). There is, to date, little research on how this cross-fertilization of institutional cultures is unfolding.

Finally, the research indicated that, contrary to the grand visions of globalization and global futures as expressed by authorities, such governing aspirations rested upon mundane micro-social practices that constituted particular social imaginaries and subjectivities. These manifested at the most devolved level located within and between individuals in neighborhoods and communities. Paradoxically, this finding conceives globalization as an effect of local capacity building and civic responsibility.

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